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SUBJECT: REFUGEES IN THE GAMBIA

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: Refugees in The Gambia comprise a disparate assortment of illiterate Senegalese farmers, Sierra Leonean professionals, and Liberians. While UNHCR provides for almost every imaginable need for the residents of Bambali Camp, urban refugees in Banjul struggle to eke out a meager existence while dodging overly zealous immigration officers. Notably, some 300 Sierra Leoneans earn a respectable living as teachers, welcomed in a country with a shortage of trained professionals. Residence status varies considerably. Some refugees enjoy legal recognition by UNHCR and the Government of The Gambia (GOTG). Others await adjudication of their applications, while a large group of Sierra Leoneans is considered to be economic migrants, ineligible for refugee status. Resettlement prospects, while modest, appear to be most promising among the Senegalese and Liberians. End Summary.

Historical Background

12. (U) The tiny nation of The Gambia is home to one of the larger refugee populations in the sub-region. Its relatively calm political environment may have been the prime drawing factor that led 6,000 Senegalese, 3,000 Sierra Leoneans, and 2,500 Liberians to seek refuge within its borders over the past fifteen years. The largest group, the Senegalese, fled fighting in the southern Casamance region in 1990-97; for many of them, fleeing meant a walk of several hours across the unpatrolled Gambian border, where the international community quickly set up two camps. Many found a warm welcome among their fellow Wolof-speaking Gambian counterparts. In 1991, 108 of them were relocated to Bambali Camp, strategically built on the north bank of the Gambia River to discourage repeated cross-border movements and arms smuggling to and from the Casamance. The remainder live a precarious existence in or around Banjul.

13. (U) The first wave of Sierra Leoneans arrived in 1997, a trend that continued for another two years. Numbering as many as 10,000, some estimates put their current strength at 3,000, although 6,269 officially registered with UNHCR two years ago. Many of these were urban professionals who, not surprisingly, settled in Banjul. Some found work in the tourist industry; others drove taxis until the GOTG rescinded the licenses of all non-Gambian taxi drivers in 2004. A more fortunate 300 refugees landed jobs as teachers. Despite modest salaries, these Sierra Leoneans received a special welcome in a country with a shortage of trained pedagogues. The group includes 2,500 more recent arrivals who are considered to be economic migrants and thus ineligible for refugee status.

14. (U) Of the Liberians, about 200 remain in the farflung Basse Camp, in eastern Gambia, which is officially closed. Another two Liberians share Bambali Camp with the Senegalese, while the vast majority (2,300) live in Banjul. Unfortunately for them, only 700 are officially recognized as refugees. As elsewhere in the region, Liberians began to arrive in The Gambia in 1990, in response to violence at home.

Assistance

15. (U) Refugees in the isolated Bambali Camp, four hours east of the capital, epitomize the best efforts of the donor community. The 110 residents of this boutique camp can take advantage of free schooling, medical care, and numerous opportunities to earn a living -- gardening, fishing, animal husbandry, baking bread, and selling eggs. The more enterprising make eight dollars per day by harvesting a perfumed root used in making room freshener and selling it to Senegalese traders. The painted concrete housing is relatively spacious and clean; relations with nearby villagers are cordial. A PRM-funded project to put two additional wells into operation is nearing completion.

16. (U) At the other end of the scale are the Sierra Leoneans, for whom all UNHCR assistance ceased as of June 2004. The more desperate refugees are resorting to prostitution or submitting to forced marriage in order to survive. In addition to teaching, some have found work in the hotel industry, but all struggle to pay school fees and provide for their own daily necessities. The unrecognized

Liberian and Senegalese refugees are similarly denied UNHCR assistance, except for UNHCR legal advice.

17. (U) The recognized Liberian and Senegalese refugees in Banjul fall somewhere in the middle. Though not receiving food as per UNHCR policy vis-a-vis urban refugees, they do receive payment for their children's school fees. Many of these are from rural areas of their home countries and find adapting to a hardscrabble urban existence difficult.

Host Government Treatment of Refugees

18. (SBU) Musa Mboob, the Director General of the Gambian Immigration Service, exuded concern and compassion for the refugees during a March 16 meeting with Emboffs. He faces the multiple challenges of dealing with three major nationalities among the refugee population (including the large contingent from neighboring Senegal), trafficking and exploitation of children, and sex tourism. Separate meetings with refugees hours later painted a different picture. All nationalities reported constant harassment at the immigration checkpoints set up at various points, even in the city. UNHCR also acknowledged that it had turned over its refugee ID-making equipment to the GOTG. Unfortunately, the equipment had been sent to Geneva for repairs, leaving the GOTG unable to issue or renew refugee ID's. Those with lost or expired ID's are the most frequent targets of harassment.

Resettlement Prospects

19. (SBU) Although the Senegalese said their only desire was to return home when peace was "100 percent guaranteed," UNHCR Representative Ron Mponda opined that the peace process in the Casamance was "faltering" and he anticipated the need for resettlement of some of the urban Senegalese, due also to an increasing emphasis on hiring only Gambians on the local economy. For the same reason, resettlement may also be the best durable solution for a limited number of Liberians. As for the Sierra Leoneans, UNHCR has promoted repatriation under the terms of a tripartite agreement signed in 2003, but only about 13 percent of them took advantage of UNHCR assistance to repatriate during 2004. There is general skepticism over resettlement prospects for this group because of fears that rumors of free tickets to the U.S. or Australia could trigger a mass exodus from Sierra Leone itself. UNHCR staff was nonetheless open-minded about resettling refugees of any nationality who face "psycho-social" problems and are unable to adapt to life in The Gambia.

110. (SBU) As elsewhere, UNHCR is under-staffed and under-funded. Geneva is considering closing the office in Banjul as a cost-cutting measure (and servicing The Gambia from its Senegal office) even though neighboring Senegal has fewer recognized refugees. Ironically, the Banjul office has only been open since November 2003.

Comment

11. (SBU) It was a pleasant surprise to discover a thriving, well managed camp functioning in a country of such limited means. The disparate treatment afforded different groups of refugees is particularly visible in The Gambia. We might encourage the host government to be more generous in its treatment of urban refugees, some of whom find it increasingly difficult to earn a paycheck. Yet the problem may not be as severe as UNHCR and refugees allege, since most of the foreigners (who comprise about half of the population of The Gambia) are self-sustaining. We hope UNHCR will follow through with appropriate referrals for resettlement for the most vulnerable refugee families.

112. (U) This cable was cleared by Embassy Banjul prior to transmission.
YATES